Speaking My Mind

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Freedom, Smut Surfing, and the Internet

There is no beauty unadorned and no excellence that would not become barbaric if it were not supported by artifice.

—Balthasar Gracian

The recent Supreme Court decision to take a “hands-off” approach to censorship of the Internet has made me restive. Having a master’s degree in computer systems, much work experience as a database analyst, and some knowledge of the great volume of information that exists online, I have always been a great believer in the possibilities of the Internet as an educational tool. Because I know that computers are used little in the classrooms of public schools, I wanted to create a library of website URLs (addresses) that could help persuade teachers and administrators that integration of the Internet in the secondary school curriculum was an idea whose time had come.

I gathered addresses of a few hundred locations of solid educational merit and had written a preliminary outline for an article touting the unique advantages of the Internet; however, one day when I visited a tenth grade English classroom at a nearby school, a conversation with a sixteen-year-old girl made me rethink my position.

“Do you ever use the Internet in any of your classes?” I asked.

“Are you kidding? Not with all the sex on there. Not in school.”

I was taken aback. I asked her, “Do you really think there’s any more focus on sex on the Internet than on network TV?”

The sixteen-year-old looked at me incredulously. “You don’t see ‘Dogsex’ much on television.” “Dogsex?”

“My brother says that there’s a chat room and a newsgroup and all that they talk about is having sex with dogs, you know, how-to, and with pictures and everything. Pretty sick-o, if you ask me.”

The bell rang and the sixteen-year-old walked off.

That night, I went back to my office and began searching for, well, not just “Dogsex,” but some validation that sordid smut on the Internet was rampant. At first, I found only sites that confirmed my suspicion that the student had been exaggerating, but after some effort, I uncovered an address that provided a link to hundreds of sites that promised and delivered pornography and subversive images free to anyone who could point and click. According to the WebCounter, the site receives well over a half-million hits *a day* (the number of persons who visit the site). Obviously, not everyone was as ignorant about the prevalence of

sex on the Internet as I. In comparison, the most popular of my former haunts receives, at most, a couple hundred hits a week.

After some surfing, I found that the usual *modus operandi* for a porn site on the Internet would be to offer several free images, then try to sell the surfer something—a password, a subscription, and/or a video. Indeed, evidence exists that the multi-billion-dollar porn video market is going online, as is the burgeoning “telephone sex” market, which purportedly did a lively business that generated around \$2 billion last year. Unfortunately, it appears that the skin trade on the Internet is only in its seedling stage.

Surfing for Smut

At the library of the university where I used to work, the decision was made to gut all of the card catalogues and half of the space for books to make room for three hundred Internet-ready computers. The last time I went into the library and sat at a terminal, of the students in my purview, one was looking over car ads; three guys were huddled around a terminal watching a pornographic movie; a man in a long ponytail was watching Japanese anime, which came with a noisy audio accompaniment; two students were playing video games; and two people were checking their e-mail. Apparently, students are unconcerned about which websites they access, even in such seemingly open areas as a university library.

As a result of my brief, depressing side trip into smutdom, I have begun wondering if allowing unrestricted access to the Internet is such a good idea. Of course, I know that there are sites on the Internet with phenomenal possibilities for education—the Gutenberg Project, the American Literature Archives, Zuzu’s Petals Literary Site, the Medieval Literature Center, and thousands of Shakespeare sites. And I know that there are several software programs that screen out “most objectionable” sites (except the brand new ones and newsgroups, according to my sixteen-year-old informant). But the Internet is wide open country, a virtual paradise for carnality where anarchy rules, and I wonder if children have the discipline to stay the course. That is, I wonder if children have the willpower to settle for intellectually enriching, aesthetically pleasing information if they know that a conglomeration of wild, provocative circus acts lurks only keystrokes away.

Consider this scenario. You are an adolescent, sitting in front of a computer at school, momentarily unsupervised. As the teacher roams the other side of the computer lab, the options that run through your mind as possibilities for surfing on the Internet are as follows:

- (a) the school assignment at hand
- (b) an online newscast
- (c) a compendium of photos and articles on mosquitoes
- (d) a selection of film clips from the new, soon-to-be-released, made-for-television adaptation of a Henry James novel
- (e) a collection of cartoons and comic strips
- (f) a woman trying to sell a gold-trimmed plate
- (g) a photographic collection of adults at an orgy
- (h) a video of four people pushing fruit into each others’ orifices.

While many of these options may seem unappealing to you and some might even repulse you, as an adolescent, you might be tempted, even under the fluorescent lighting of English class, to venture into forbidden zones. Of course, thousands of new acts/sites make their way onto the Internet every day.

The URL of Your Dreams

With the Internet, there is no suppressed Id, nothing lurking in the shadows. Every dream, every nightmare, has a URL, living and breathing in full motion video only a point and click away. While I still believe that the Internet may hold great value as an educational tool, at times I fear that unrestricted access to the Internet for children is like throwing a party for a mob of twelve-year-olds and supplying them with a case of loaded shotguns and ninety-nine cases of beer.

While I cannot ascribe to the idea of some governmental entity hovering above the Internet and filtering out things that they think might be bad for me, I cringe at the eventual fallout of a generation of worldly, adolescent smut surfers, who know more about “dogsex” and sexual perversity than about life, love, and the vast, unwired world.

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